

Testimony of Laiza Melendez supporting
SB487 - An Act Establishing the Infant and Toddler
Early Care and Family Support Initiative

Senator Fonfara, Representative Scanlan, member of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, my name is Laiza Meléndez and I'm representing the Even Start Director's Coalition which represents Middletown, New London and Torrington. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of SB487.

Even Start is a two-generation program working with the entire family. The program has a comprehensive approach of integrated components – adult education/workforce readiness, parenting education, early childhood education, interactive literacy and home visiting intended to collectively reduce adversity and build capacity. One of the goals of this program is to provide high-quality, early childhood education which will be the foundation for success in school and will help break the cycle of illiteracy. Another focus is to provide parents with opportunities that will lead to economic self-sufficiency.

Even Start has been serving New London for the past 22 years and over the years the number of families seeking services with infants and toddlers has more than doubled. Currently all three sites have a waiting list for infant and toddlers and surrounding area centers do not have availability. Yesterday, I contacted 10 childcare centers in the New London and Groton area, and they all had a waiting list with an expected availability between six months to a year and half. Since 80% of a child's brain development occurs during the first three years and is critical to the cognitive development which includes thinking, learning and problem-solving skills, what do you think is happening to the infants and toddlers not being able to access early childhood education? Do they have an even start? Or are we creating a cascade of deficits?

If we invest in our children we will not continue this negative loop affecting the economic, public health and educational system, instead programs like Even Start can provided an atmosphere where they can have developmentally supportive experiences and stimulate their brain development. The early intervention is key to academic achievement, behavior, educational progression, and attainment. This program improves the quality of life in the short and long term of the children we serve. Overall, children in early childhood education programs are less likely to repeat a grade, less likely to be identified as having special needs in K-12, more prepared academically for later grades, more likely to attend college and are higher earners in the workforce. ¹

Another great part of this bill is that this initiative considers the need for family support services. Targeting the entire family is a holistic, comprehensive, multigenerational approach which Even Start encompasses by providing parenting education, interactive parent and child activities and home visiting services. Family support services promote healthy parent-child relationships, increases child development education, increases awareness of community resources, provides a sense of community among many other

¹ National Education Association- Early Childhood Education. www.nea.org

benefits. In New London the Even Start program provides parents access to education, a social worker, a nurse, special education consultant, early childhood education, school guidance counselor, workforce development training and a post-secondary transitions specialist. The supportive services help families identify barriers and provide encouragement and reassurance in their abilities.. The wraparound services contribute to the positive rapport established between the families, their children, and staff members. These support services help families establish a positive network to maintain the ability to “bounce back” in towns with some of the lowest median household incomes.

Even Start makes a significant difference in the lives of families, parents, young children and our community as a whole. Imagine the impact this initiative can have if we have funds to decrease the greatest deficit of early childhood availability while providing support services to families. Thank you for allowing me to express how critical these services are, and I ask you to do the right thing! Pass this bill for the families, their infants and toddlers across Connecticut who deserve an even start.

Thank you for your consideration.

Laiza Meléndez
New London Even Start Director
New London Adult Education
Three Shaw's Cove
New London, CT 06320
Tel: 860-437-2385, ext. 121
melendezl@newlondon.org
